

NOAA
FISHERIES

Office of Protected
Resources

One of the following criteria must be met for a marine mammal to be considered “stranded”

- *Dead, whether found on the beach or floating in the water.*
- *Alive on a beach but unable to return to the water.*
- *Alive on a beach and in need of apparent medical attention.*
- *Alive in the water and unable to return to its natural habitat without assistance.*

Additional Information

For additional details, please refer to the 2017 National Report of Marine Mammal Strandings in the United States.

Photo (top): Necropsy of a fin whale. Photo: Kathy Burek-Huntington.



2017 Marine Mammal Strandings Overview: Alaska Region

The U.S. Marine Mammal Stranding Network is comprised of more than 100 organizations from the academic, wildlife rehabilitation, zoo/aquarium, museum, tribe, government, or local emergency response communities authorized to respond to cetaceans (whales, dolphins, and porpoises) and pinnipeds (seals, and sea lions) that are sick, injured, in distress, or dead. These responses are authorized and overseen by NOAA Fisheries’ Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.



Figure AKR-1. NOAA Fisheries Alaska Region.

Alaska Region

The NOAA Fisheries Alaska Region (AKR) (Figure AKR-1) encompasses approximately 33,904 miles of coastline and includes several large bodies of water (Beaufort Sea, Chukchi Sea, Bering Sea, and Gulf of Alaska). Given the size and remoteness of Alaska, this region contains some of the least visited coastline in the United States. The 263 confirmed marine mammal strandings in the Alaska Region in 2017 is slightly higher than its 11-year (2006-2016) average ($n=165 \pm 77$).

What Types of Marine Mammals Strand in the AKR?

More than 25 different species of marine mammals can be found in the waters of Alaska, with the majority of stranding reports involving pinnipeds (Figure AKR-2). Common pinniped species include the harbor seal (*Phoca vitulina*), Steller sea lion (*Eumetopias jubatus*), northern fur seal (*Callorhinus ursinus*), and ringed seal (*Phoca hispida*) (Figure AKR-3). Large whale species such as gray (*Eschrichtius robustus*), humpback (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), and sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) are known to strand. The region also has many small cetacean species including the beluga whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*), harbor porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*), and killer whale (*Orcinus orca*). Belugas may live-strand when molting or chasing prey in shallow habitats, or if they are suffering from injuries or disease. Belugas may also mass strand during tidal fluctuations, which can be significant at such high latitudes. Unlike other whales and dolphins, healthy belugas that live-strand are usually able to refloat themselves during the next high tide, but some have died after live-stranding on their sides and inhaling mud and/or water.

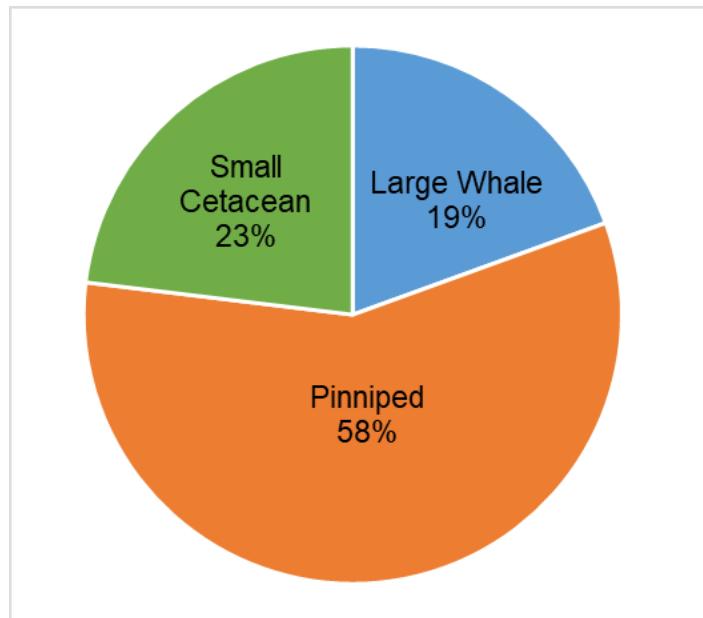


Figure AKR-2. Alaska Region marine mammal strandings, 2017 (n=263). Unknown cetacean (n=42).

Table AKR-1. Five most frequently stranded marine mammal species in the Alaska Region.

Species	Confirmed Stranding Reports 2017	11-Year Average \pm Standard Deviation ¹ (2006-2016)
Steller Sea Lion	36	36 \pm 11
Harbor Seal	35	28 \pm 12
Beluga Whale	28	15 \pm 6
Humpback Whale	22	15 \pm 9
Gray Whale	16	12 \pm 6

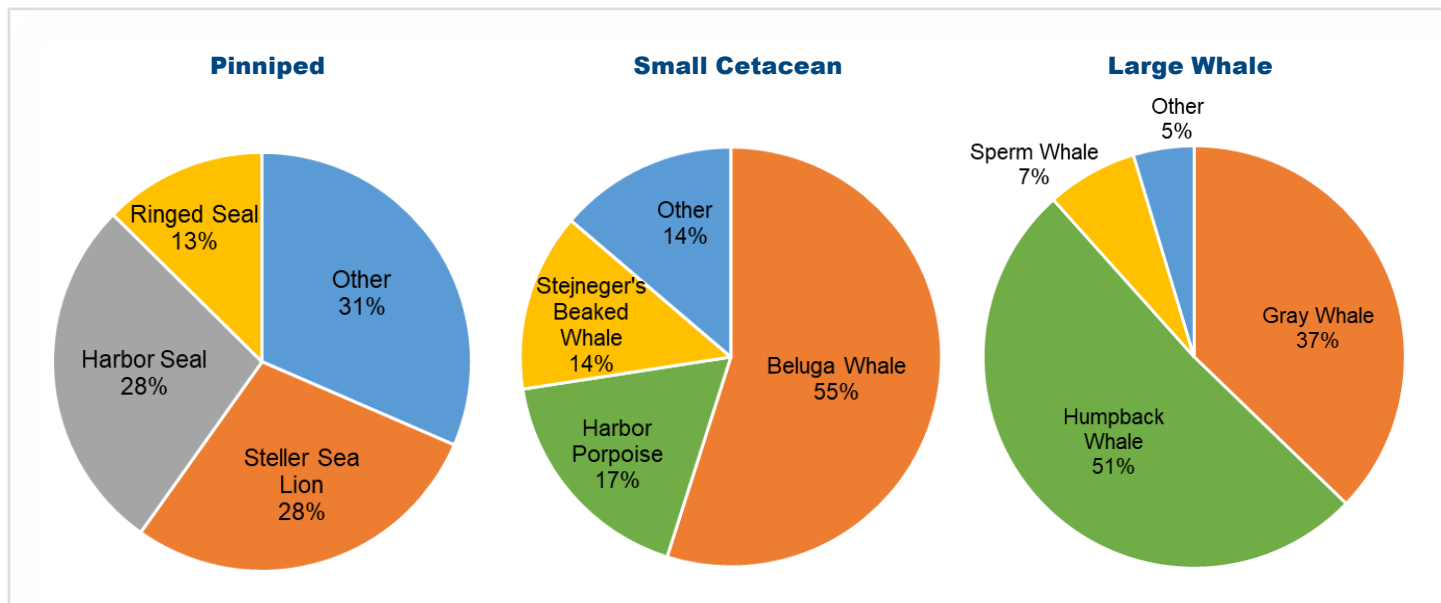


Figure AKR-3. Alaska Region marine mammal strandings, by species, 2017 (n=263). Pinnipeds (n=127), small cetaceans (n=51), large whales (n=43), and unknown cetacean (n=42).

¹ A standard deviation is a measure used to quantify the amount of variation within a set of values.

Are Marine Mammals in the AKR Stranding Alive or Dead?

In 2017, the largest proportion (73 percent) of strandings in Alaska reported to the network involved dead animals (Figure AKR-4). As most areas are remote, and network capabilities are limited due to location, the condition and identification of stranded animals cannot always be confirmed. When marine mammals strand alive, only some can be transported to the region's only marine mammal rehabilitation center, which is the Alaska Sealife Center in Seward. Of the animals admitted to rehabilitation in 2017 (n=6), 50 percent (n=3) were released.

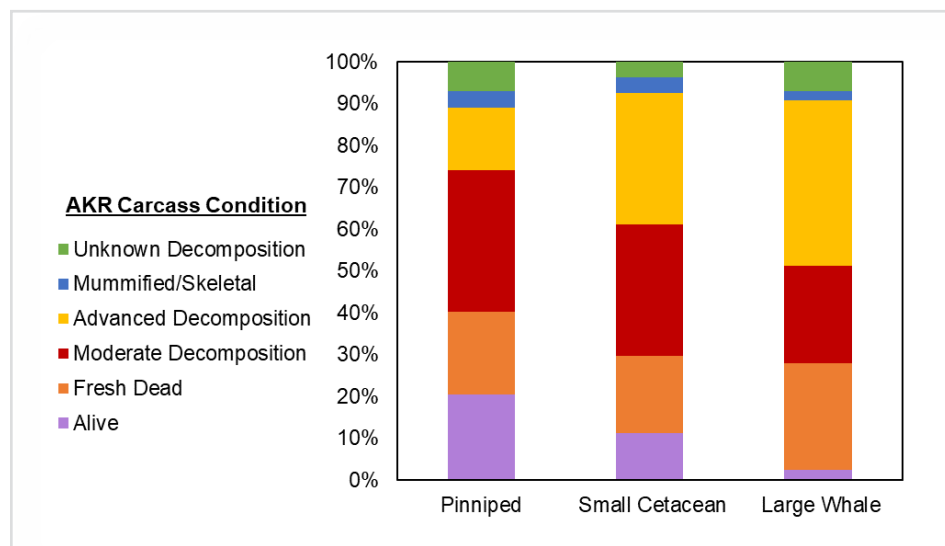


Figure AKR-4. Observation status of confirmed marine mammal strandings in the Alaska Region, 2017.

When Did AKR Marine Mammals Strand in 2017?

The Alaska Region has many year-round or seasonally resident populations of marine mammals, and the numbers of stranded animals are elevated in the spring and summer months (Figure AKR-5). This is most likely a reflection of the high number of animals that use Alaska waters in the spring and summer as their feeding grounds, such as gray whales, which migrate from winter grounds in Mexico along the west coasts of the U.S. and Canada to feed in Alaska waters in late spring/early summer. The number of marine mammal strandings reported to the network may also be higher during the summer, due to increased stranding response capabilities during the spring/summer months since the severe winters limit response efforts, especially in remote areas of Alaska.

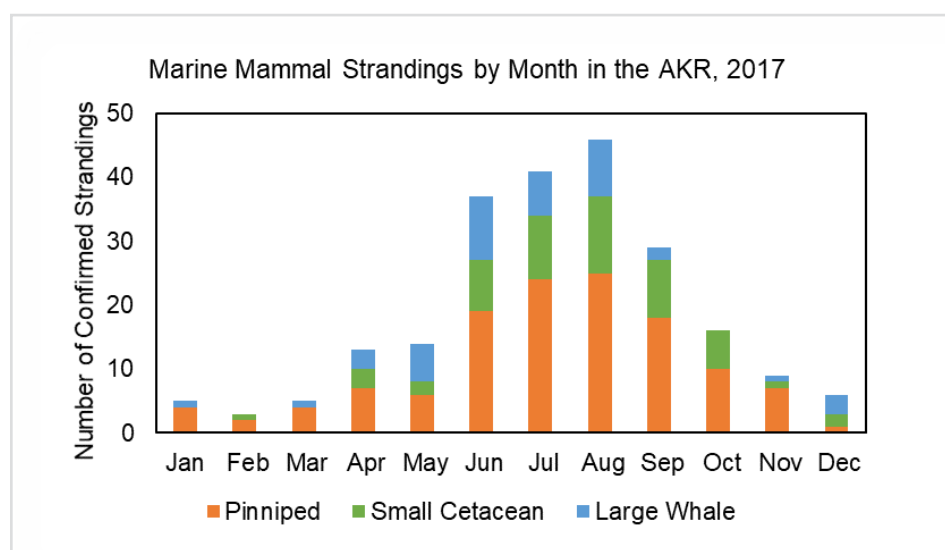


Figure AKR-5. Seasonality of marine mammal strandings in the Alaska Region, 2017.

What Types of Unusual Mortality Events Were Occurring in the AKR?

While historically there have been some Unusual Mortality Events (UMEs) declared in Alaska, there were no new or open UME investigations underway in 2017. More information about UMEs is available at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/marine-mammal-unusual-mortality-events>.

What Can Members of the Public Do?



Necropsy performed
on a Steller sea lion.
Photo: Kathy Burek-
Huntington.

Alaska Regional 24/7 Hotline

The Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program relies on reports of stranded marine mammals by the public. If you come across a stranded marine mammal please report it to your Alaska regional 24/7 hotline.

Hotline: (877) 925-7773

Reporting a Stranding

The most important information to collect includes the:

- Date
- Location of stranding (including latitude and longitude)
- Number of animals
- Condition of the animal (alive or dead), and
- Species (if known)

Photos or videos (from a safe and legal distance) can also provide valuable information to network responders. Only trained and permitted responders should approach or pick up a stranded marine mammal. You can also download the Dolphin & Whale 911 Stranding App in the Apple Store to help report a stranding.



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Getting Involved

The National Stranding Network relies on government, private, and public support to conduct its vital work to save animals in distress and understand causes of injuries and mortalities. You can make a difference by contacting your local Stranding Network (list available at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/report>) to see how you can get involved.

*Only trained and
permitted responders
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pick up a stranded
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Only confirmed stranding activities involving species under the jurisdiction of NOAA Fisheries (cetaceans and pinnipeds, except walrus) are used in this report. All data were taken from the National Stranding Database and filtered accordingly. Any duplicate events, and entries of entangled large whales, were removed from the following analyses. All data and information described within this report are correct as of October 25, 2019. All photographs were taken under Stranding Agreement, Section 109(h) authority, or permit.